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"INTO YOUR HANDS," O SCRIBES: CORRUPTED HEBREW IN THE LATIN *EVANGELIUM NICODEMI*?

Manuscripts of the Latin Evangelium Nicodemi *have many variants of the last words of Jesus, all of them incomprehensible, followed by the statement, "which means: 'Into your hands I commit my spirit'" (Luke 23:46 citing Psalm 31:5). This article explores a variety of possible explanations, but concludes that the many variants of the Latin manuscripts can be explained as the result of a series of scribal errors in copying the transliteration of the Hebrew for "into your hand, I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:5).*

*Les manuscrits de l'*Évangile de Nicodème *en latin comprennent de nombreuses variantes des derniers mots de Jésus, tous incompréhensibles, suivi de la déclaration, « ce qui signifie "entre tes mains je remets mon esprit"» (Lc 23, 46 citant le Ps 31, 5). Cet article explore les explications possibles mais conclut que les nombreuses variantes des manuscrits latins peuvent s'expliquer par une série d'erreurs dues aux scribes qui copiaient la translittération de l'hébreu « entre tes mains, je remets mon esprit » (Ps 31,5).*

What is the editor of the Latin *Evangelium Nicodemi*[1] to do when the last words of Jesus are nonsense? One could put a footnote on them indicating that they have been corrupted, but which of the many variants of the corrupt words should be in the text? And what has become corrupted? The words seem to have little or no relation to the translation that follows them, which is the last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (23:46), and a quote from Psalm 31:5 (MT 31:6): "Into your hand(s),[2] I commit my spirit." The words in the *Evangelium*

1. I have adopted the titles recommended by Zbigniew Izydorczyk, "Introduction," *The Medieval* Gospel of Nicodemus: *Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe*, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, vol. 158 (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1997), 2. Thus I use *Evangelium Nicodemi* to refer to the Latin version and *Acta Pilati* to refer to the earliest Latin and Greek versions.

2. The MT has "hand," but the LXX and Luke 23:46 have the plural "hands."

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Nicodemi look and sound like transliterations into Latin of Hebrew or Aramaic words. The problem is those words are not in the Hebrew or Aramaic of Psalm 31:5. Could they be from some other passage from the Hebrew Bible, the Peshitta, or early Jewish literature? There is a Messianic passage from the Book of Psalms that one could argue a scribe might have placed in the mouth of Jesus and could explain the Latin manuscripts. But, in the end, I will argue that it is more likely that the Latin was translated from a Greek text that had a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew of "Into your hand, I commit my spirit," but became corrupted by Latin scribes who did not know Hebrew. This provides a fairly good idea of an early text that can explain the extant manuscripts and might contribute to an understanding of the history and transmission of the Gospel of Nicodemus in Latin. While reference will be made to Greek manuscripts[3] to establish that an early Greek manuscript probably had a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew, the focus of the study is Latin manuscripts.

The words in the Latin manuscripts look and sound like Hebrew. Most family A manuscripts begin with *VIA* (25, 75, 199, 269, 133) or *Uia* (158, 215, 288), or something similar. This is then followed by *ata* (23, 199),[4] or *ALHOHE* (25, 119, 269, 133) or something similar like *ALA hohE* (7), *alah hóhe* (263), or *aloHohe* (158).[5] Hebrew often begins sentences with a ו (*vav*) "and" or "but," with the vowel points indicating pronunciation as either וְ (*ve*), or sometimes וּ (*u*). Thus Hebrew ו (*vav*) might have been transliterated into Latin as either *V* or *U*. Moreover, *ia* could be transliterating יָהּ (*yah*) which is a short form of the personal name of God in classical Hebrew. *Ata* could be the Hebrew personal pronoun אַתָּה (*'attâ*), "you." *ALHOHE*, sounds like אֱלֹהַי (*'ĕlohê*), "my God," in Hebrew.[6] The whole phrase, then, could be translated as something like "But Yah my God" or, since the name of God is usually translated Lord in small caps, "But the Lord my God." Although this sounds like classical Hebrew, this combination of words

3. I am indebted to Rémi Gounelle for the readings of Greek manuscripts.

4. The manuscript numbers are from Zbigniew Izydorczyk. I would like to thank him for providing me with a list of the variants in a representative selection of Latin manuscripts from families A, B, and C.

5. The manuscripts mix capital, uncial, and minuscule letters and the above examples approximate these peculiarities in type. As the discussion below progresses, the references to the readings of the manuscripts will not continue to represent the different sizes and types of letters.

6. The words in parentheses throughout the paper are transliterations of the Hebrew for the convenience of those who cannot read Hebrew. The system used for transliterating Hebrew is the academic style from Patrick Alexander, *et al.*, *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 26.

does not appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. The words look and sound like Hebrew, but that may be accidental.

Since word divisions are often absent in Latin and Greek and, when scribes inserted them in words that were probably incomprehensible to them, they would be meaningless, I will largely ignore spaces in the Latin and Greek texts and organize the discussion around the Hebrew words, בְּיָדְךָ֣ אַפְקִ֣יד רוּחִ֑י (*bĕyādĕkā ʾaphkîd rûḥî*), "into your hand, I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:6 MT; 31:5 EVV).

First, the Hebrew word אַפְקִ֣יד (*ʾaphkîd*), "I commit," can be shown to have become the Latin word *HEFRIT* through a series of textual corruptions. *HEFRIT*[7] occurs repeatedly in manuscripts from family A (23, 25, 75, 119, 133, 158, 263, 269; 179 has *ferit*, 268 has *etferit*, and 215 and 288 have *ecfrit*). Manuscripts from family C have *etfitule* (141) and *etfritule* (291). Other manuscripts from family C do not have these words. The words are absent in most family B manuscripts, but 336 and 284 have *fit*.

This Latin word, *HEFRIT,* can be explained as a corruption of an early Greek text, which had a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew אַפְקִ֣יד (*ʾaphkîd*), "I commit." Greek manuscript B has ἐφέ. Κεδ (*epheked*),[8] which is fairly close to a transliteration of the Hebrew. As is well known, classical Hebrew was written in consonants with a few consonants serving double duty as *matres lectionis* indicating vowel sounds. The vocalization of the Hebrew that I am using is from the Masoretic vowel points that developed in the ninth through twelfth centuries of the Common Era to preserve the traditional pronunciation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. When the Greek was transliterated, there may have been regional and dialectical variations in pronunciation of the Hebrew, which could have produced something close to ἐφέ.Κεδ (*epheked*). Or the Greek of manuscript B may be a corruption of an earlier ἀφκίδ (*aphkid*). Greek *phi* and *theta* are similar sounds and were evidently confused by an error of hearing because texts of family 𝔉 have ἐθκίδ (*ethkid*). Therefore, Hebrew אַפְקִ֣יד (*ʾaphkîd*) was transliterated into Greek as either ἀκίδ (*aphkid*) or ἐφκίδ (*ephkid*) that became ἐφέ.Κεδ (*epheked*) in manuscript B and ἐθκίδ (*ethkid*) in family 𝔉 by an error of hearing.

An original Greek ἐφκίδ (*ephkid*) would have been transliterated into Latin as something like *efkid*. I have no expertise in Latin linguistics, but the letter *k* seems to be used less frequently in Latin than other letters. A search of a computer database of the Latin Vulgate found no words containing *"fki"* or *"fke."* If this combination were linguistically

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7. The manuscripts do not all have the word all in capitals, but continue to vary the size and type of letters as mentioned previously.

8. I am indebted to Rémi Gounelle for the readings of Greek manuscripts.

difficult, or unusual in Latin, then *efkid* would soon become *efid.* Since *d* and *t* represent closely related sounds, *efid* would easily become *efit*. This would eventually become *efrit*, but the reason for this final change needs to await the discussion of the following word.

The next word in the Hebrew text is רוּחִי (*rûḥî*),[9] "my spirit." The *r* and long *u* sounds are evident in a number of Greek and Latin manuscripts. Greek manuscript N retains *rôsi*, manuscript B has *rouel*, and manuscripts of family Φ have *douel*. The Hebrew letter *ḥet* would be difficult to transliterate into Greek, because Greek does not have a letter that corresponds to the Hebrew sound.[10] The Greek letter *chi* has a sound close to Hebrew *ḥet* and would be a reasonable choice to transliterate *ḥet*. Therefore, an early text that lies behind these manuscripts could have had *rouchi*. Then *rouchi* could have become *rôsi* in manuscript N by confusion of similar sounds. A poorly formed Greek uncial letter *chi* with a short or missing stroke on the upper right-hand side, could have been confused with a *lamda*, which would produce the reading *roule*. By metathesis of the final two letters this then became *rouel*, the reading of manuscript B. The reading of Greek family Φ arose when the *rho* in *roule* assimilated to the consonant at the end of the previous word. Thus *ephkid rouel* became *ephkid douel*. In addition, *phi* was confused with *theta* producing the reading of family Φ *ethkid douel*. Thus an original transliteration of Hebrew into Greek as **rouchi* could explain the origin of the readings in manuscripts N and B, and texts of family Φ. This is, of course, speculative and there are other possible reconstructions, but it is clear that the Greek, especially of manuscripts N and B, is recognizable as an only slightly corrupted transliteration of the Hebrew.

The Latin then could have been translated from an earlier Greek reading that had **ephkid roule*. This was transliterated into Latin as **efkid roule*, which would easily become *efkid role* either by parablepsis or an error of hearing. As mentioned previously, the *k* was lost because it was rare or difficult for Latin speakers and became **efid role*. Since *d* and *t* represent similar sounds, **efid role* became **efit role*. The readings of a couple of Latin manuscripts of family B seem to retain elements of this early reading. Manuscript 336 has *fit ruhel,* and 284 has *fitruel* (*e* and *l* have metathesized or been transposed as in Greek). The transposition of *t* and *r* produced *efritole,* which is the reading of most manuscripts from family A. As is common in Latin manuscripts, a letter *h* arose at the beginning producing *hefritole.* Thus,

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9. The *h* with the dot under it represents the Hebrew letter *Het*.

10. The Semitic letter developed into *êta* and rough and smooth breathing marks in Greek, but these are different sounds than represented in Hebrew by the letter *Het*.

the Latin *hefritole*, and variations, can be explained as a corruption of an early Greek reading which was a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew אַפְקִיד רוּחִי (*'aphkîd rûḥî*), "I commit my spirit."

This leaves the preceding words in Latin manuscripts that sound like Hebrew.

One possible explanation of the incomprehensible words is that they were just sets of consonants and vowels considered to have magical power. Jews and Christians in late antiquity sometimes made ritual use of incomprehensible words or sets of consonants and vowels evidently considered to have special powers.[11] The use of words like "abracadabra" and "hocus-pocus" may be remnants in contemporary English of this sort of practice. Yet the fact that most of the words can be explained as corruptions of a transliteration of Psalm 31:5 makes it less likely that they are all nonsense words.

Alberto Camplani has shown that in a context where words from other languages and religions were borrowed for their instrumental power, the words of Jesus on the cross were considered especially powerful, because of the cosmic signs that accompanied them in the narrative, and because they were in Hebrew. As a result, he notes a tendency in Coptic to add other words considered powerful, like Hebrew and Aramaic names for God, and eventually use the words in other contexts.[12] By analogy, the incomprehensible words in Latin could be words that were added because they were thought powerful.

Hebrew and Aramaic titles for God and numerous combinations and permutations of the consonants and vowels of the Hebrew name for God were commonly used this way.[13] If the letters of Latin *uia* have been transposed from an earlier *iau*, this might represent the short form of the Hebrew name for God יָהוּ (*yahu*). Similarly, *alhohe,* may have been a later insertion of the Aramaic word for God, אֱלָהָא (*'ĕlāhā'*). The instrumental use of divine names could be one of the reasons for the addition of the Aramaic *eli eli*, or *heli heli* "my God, my God," or Latin *pater* "father" in some Latin manuscripts.

Yet the suggestion that some or all the words were magical words and the hypothesis that the words are corruptions of a transliteration of Psalm 31:5 in Hebrew are not mutually exclusive. Ritual texts

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11. Marvin W. Meyer & Richard Smith, eds. *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 22.

12. Alberto Camplani, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani, Pluralità dei linguaggi religiosi e loro rielaborazione rituale in alcune preghiere magiche copte," *Studi e materiali di Storia della Religioni* 76/1 (2010): 139-150.

13. Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 306.

sometimes used incomprehensible words or sets of consonants and vowels evidently considered powerful, but there was also a tendency to use names and titles for God from other languages that become progressively corrupted. If the words of Jesus in Latin manuscripts were treated as having special power, this might have contributed to their corruption. The fact that Jesus said them on the cross and that they sounded like Hebrew or Aramaic may have become more important to scribes who no longer knew Hebrew than preserving an accurate transliteration.

Another possible explanation is that the words were inserted for theological reasons. A number of Latin manuscripts (and other versions) insert the words of Jesus in Aramaic from the gospels of Matthew and Mark (Matt 27:46; cf Mark 15:34). The two gospels have slightly different transliterations of the Aramaic in Greek letters. Matthew has Ἠλί, Ἠλί, λιμὰ σαβαχθανι (*ēli ēli lima sabachthani*), "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me," which is a quote from the Aramaic of Psalm 22:1. The words *eli eli*, "my God, my God," appear in two manuscripts from family A (179, 268) before the words we have been examining. The whole phrase appears at the end of A 199. The phrase alone appears in family B manuscript 145. Since this phrase is transliterated in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, it could have been added to manuscripts at any time, perhaps out of a desire to harmonize the Gospel of Nicodemus with the canonical gospels.

The words are, however, quite unsuited to the *Acts of Pilate*, because they appear to represent a low Christology, or a very human picture of Jesus feeling forsaken by God. In a document so interested in answering objections to the divinity of Christ, there may have been a felt need for an alternative to the gospels of Matthew and Mark. This may have motivated the transliteration of Jesus' words in Luke (23:46) into Hebrew.[14] And the desire to support a higher Christology, a more divine Christ, may have motivated the search for a different *ēli*, "my God" saying.

The book of Psalms is the Old Testament book most frequently cited by the canonical gospels. Psalm 89, a Messianic psalm, contains the following:

> He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!' I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth (Psalm 89:26-27).

14. It is interesting that the quote is in Hebrew rather than in Aramaic as in the canonical gospels. While there are a number of possible reasons, this may be evidence of the date, provenance, and authorship of the *Acta Pilati* in Latin.

Since this is a messianic psalm, Christians may have wondered when Jesus said this. And two gospels say Jesus cried aloud before breathing his last (Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37), but do not say what he cried. The Hebrew words for "You are my Father, my God" are אָבִי אַתָּה אֵלִי (*'āvî 'āttâ 'ēlî*). So this Messianic passage has the words of the Messiah include *'ēlî* just before God confers on the Messiah reign over all the nations of the earth. One can easily understand Christians with a high Christology, who had trouble with the *eli* sayings of the gospels of Matthew and Mark, finding this other *eli* saying of the Messiah more appealing. Because it was in the Bible, it would be considered "true," suitable for inclusion in the *Acts of Pilate*, and provide the answer to what Jesus cried.

Greek and Latin precedes the so-called nonsense words with *Pater* and there is some evidence that this, too, was translated into Hebrew as the Georgian version of the *Acts of Pilate* has *Obia*[15] which is close to Hebrew אָבִי (*'āvî*), "my father." If the letters of *Avi* were corrupted to *via*, this would correspond to many of the Latin manuscripts. If the original, or an early copy, used the longer, Hebrew version of "my God," אֱלֹהַי (*'ĕlōhê*), which was either transliterated *alohe*, or became *alohe*, under the influence of the preceding *a* sounds, then an early manuscript would have had **avi ata alohe*. This reading could explain the various readings of surviving manuscripts. In some manuscripts, *alohe* could have been lost by homeoarcton, producing the reading of the manuscripts with *ata*. In other manuscripts, *ata* could have been lost by homeoarcton, producing *via alohe*. If an error of hearing caused a reduplication of the *h*, then this would give the reading of many other manuscripts *via alhohe*. Thus an early Latin manuscript would have had **avi ata alohe efkid role*, "My Father, you are my God … I commit my spirit."

All of the above possibilities for explaining the origin of the various words in Latin manuscripts are speculative, but the least speculative, and therefore marginally more likely is that the Latin texts are corruptions of Hebrew "into your hands" after being copied from early Greek manuscripts, and only one word from the Hebrew remains to be explained in this way. As with other words from Psalm 31:6 (MT), Greek manuscripts preserve a fairly accurate transliteration of the Hebrew בְּיָדְךָ (*bĕyādĕkā*). Manuscript N has *biadag*. Manuscript B has *barachach*. Texts from family Φ have *baddach*. Thus an earlier Greek reading may have had something like **biadacha*, which could explain the readings in the various Greek manuscripts.

This could have been translated into Latin as **biadacha*. The initial *bia* is retained in many Latin manuscripts as *via,* presumably caused

15. Bernard Outtier, "Acta Pilati géorgien," an unpublished manuscript.

by an error of hearing. **Biadacha* thus became **via dacha*. Two family B manuscripts seem to retain evidence of an original *cha*. 336 has *ech* and 284 has *ac*. In other manuscripts this sound seems to have been replaced by *h*, again presumably by an error of hearing. Thus **via dacha* became **via daha*. A metathesis of *a* and *d* could then have produced **via adha.* Errors of hearing could then have produced either *via ata* (B 23, 199), or *via alho* (B 25, 119, 269, 133), *alaho* (75), *alahho* (263), *alao* (215, 288), and *aloho* (158). Thus an original Latin, which was a transliteration of Hebrew "into your hand," could explain the Latin manuscripts through a combination of errors of hearing and metathesis.

In sum, the Latin *Evangelium Nicodemi* originally had something like **biadacha efkid roule* and the corruption of the text gave rise to the current plethora of variants. Much more work could be done understanding the processes of corruption by examining what kinds of letters were easily confused in what periods and hands, the errors typical of particular manuscripts, and the linguistic rules of Latin. Nevertheless, enough has been said to make it plausible that the last words of Jesus in Latin and other versions are corruptions of the Hebrew of "into your hands, I commit my spirit" (Ps 31:6 ET 5). This also provides a piece of evidence for the history of the reconstruction of the text, because it is evident that the writer of the *Acta Pilati*, or at least a very early scribe who inserted the words in a Greek manuscript, knew Hebrew, whereas most later copyists of Latin did not read Hebrew, so that the corruptions multiplied until the original Hebrew became almost unrecognizable.